

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR K-12 PERSONNEL TO ADDRESS SIBLING AGGRESSION AND ABUSE

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- 1 Educate yourself on the topic of sibling aggression and abuse.** Youth are more likely to experience aggression or abuse by a sibling than by a caregiver, partner, or peer. Yet, most K-12 school personnel receive little to no training on this topic.
- 2 Understand the difference between sibling rivalry and sibling aggression or abuse.** Sibling rivalry is considered healthy and is often friendly competition between siblings; whereas aggression is mutual or one-sided physical or psychological harm, and abuse is when a sibling aims to control or overpower another sibling sexually, physically, or psychologically.
- 3 Acknowledge and believe a student's concerns or complaints about a sibling.** If a student shares concerns about their sibling(s), it is important to empathize and believe them. Youth may not report sibling aggression and abuse because they fear retaliation or breaking family bonds. Therefore, it is vitally important when it is reported to take the student seriously and take action.
- 4 Help assess if what a student is experiencing is sibling aggression or abuse.** Similar to an assessment for child abuse, there are different questions you might ask a child about sibling aggression or abuse. You want to check to see what type of behaviors are happening, how often, by whom (sometimes it is more than one sibling), if their caregiver is aware and has done anything to intervene, and if they feel safe in their home.
- 5 Look for non-verbal signs of sibling aggression and abuse.** A student experiencing sibling aggression or abuse may exhibit similar non-verbal signs to child abuse. These might include, but are not limited to, signs of depression or anxiety, not wanting to go home, avoiding their sibling(s) at school, withdrawing, or acting out aggressively towards others.

**6 Work with the student to conceptualize what are healthy vs. unhealthy sibling interactions.** Just as students are taught about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships with peers in the K-12 setting, these lessons can easily be extended to include siblings. Because siblings often live together, they may experience other kinds of aggression or abuse, like breaking cherished items or harming a family pet.

**7 If you suspect sibling aggression or abuse is happening, make a plan to support your student.** Let the student know they did the right thing by telling you about the sibling aggression or abuse they are experiencing. If appropriate, let them know how you plan to support them (e.g., talking to caregivers, referring to school mental health professionals, reporting to child protective services).

**8 Intervene and advocate on behalf of your student.** All K-12 personnel should know the protocol at their school for reporting child abuse. This same protocol can, and should, include sibling abuse. If the organization where you report sibling abuse does not recognize it as a type of abuse, then you can consider reporting it as parental neglect. This would be appropriate if the caregivers are aware of the sibling aggression or abuse and not taking steps to prevent or stop it.

**9 Evaluate if what you have done is helping your student.** Check in with the student regularly to see how things are going at home since you intervened. If things have not gotten better or have gotten worse, you will want to continue to report this and/or seek additional support.

**10 Get support and consult with others throughout this process.** Sibling aggression and abuse can have long-term mental health effects such as depression, drug abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder. If you are not a school mental health professional, partner with someone who is to help advocate for your student.

### **SIGNS A STUDENT MAY BE EXPERIENCING SIBLING ABUSE**

- **Not wanting to go home after school**
- **Avoiding their sibling(s) at school**
- **Social isolation**
- **Being bullied or bullying others**

SAARA is an initiative that aims to prevent and stop sibling aggression and abuse.

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